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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3083
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 3299
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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001632

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TAGS: EAIR MO PINR PTER
SUBJECT: MOROCCO TIGHTENS AIRPORT SECURITY

REF: RABAT 01579

Classified By: Econ Counselor Stuart Smith, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) The arrest of four women, two married to pilots of the national carrier Royal Air Maroc, has resulted in increased security measures at all Moroccan airports. The women were arrested for involvement in the Ansar Al Mahdi terrorist cell, initially broken-up by Moroccan security forces on August 8. As a result of the arrest of the women on August 29, and their connection with Royal Air Maroc, the National Committee for Aviation Security met on August 31 to discuss and implement increased security measures.

¶2. (C) In a meeting with EconOff on September 1, Abdelouahab Yaalaoui, Director of Civil Aviation, Ministry of Transportation and Public Works, explained that the two pilots have been grounded and denied access to both Royal Air Maroc and Moroccan airport facilities. He added that an investigation into their involvement is on-going. Referring to increased security measures implemented at the airports, he said special treatment afforded dignitaries has been terminated, and that all passengers must pass through the same line and undergo the same procedures. In addition, all luggage is checked twice, first by hand and then by x-ray, and all electronic equipment (cell phones, cameras, etc.) must pass through the x-ray machines during passenger screening. He also mentioned that security along airport perimeters and within the airport grounds has been increased by augmenting the number of guards, agents, and dogs. When asked how long the increased measures would remain in effect, Yaalaoui replied indefinitely.

¶3. (C) The Ansar Al Mahdi network is allegedly headed by Lahssen El Khattab, a former member of the outlawed extremist group Salafiya Jihadiya (Salafi Jihad). He had been arrested after the May 16, 2003 Casablanca bombings and spent two years in prison before being pardoned by the King. In open press reporting, Khattab allegedly recruited Emir Yassine El Ouerdini to head the group's military wing, which was allegedly preparing to commit a series of terrorist military operations. Among these plans was a plan to blow-up the Sale airbase by targeting fuel depots. To date, more than 50 arrests have been made since August 8 in connection with the Ansar Al Mahdi cell.

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